

Arasoi Chuugi

by Axey Moskevyyu

Suzomi Sasaki reclined against her rickety deck chair and traced a finger around the rim of her favorite gyokuro. Vapors from the tea mixed with moist peat smell coming from the remnants of her early morning labor. The planter boxes revitalized. The deck resplendent with blue and purple pansies, impatiens, forced tulips, flame saffron and pixie euonymus cuttings from her mother's greenhouse. Flecks of mica glinted from the potting soil sticking to her jeans and gardening tools. If not for class, she could lose a few hours bathing in warm rays of sunlight tracking across the deck. A lazy May California day. How could Iwao think he was having more fun?

Though Suzo never asked it of him, Iwao texted religiously. Daily. Several times a day. Suzo wasn't sure if his constant messaging was gratitude for his birthday present, or if he thought Suzo was lonesome. Either way, he was determined to share every detail of his trip to Toronto. Each new missive came with pictures of buildings, landmarks, his hotel room, public transportation, whatever he ate and any random person he happened to meet. The snaps from last night featured Iwao in a bar. Flush-faced from alcohol; he stood entangled in a tight scrum of boisterous men gesturing and spilling peanut shells and pints of beer. "I like Canadians," he wrote. He wished her goodnight with a goofy inebriated smile and an unintelligible arrangement of oyster crackers on a bar stool. Suzo grinned.

It wasn't a lonely week. Her friends were a lot less shy with him out of town and she had carte blanche with his Civic. She dutifully reported to work and went to class, but any unscheduled part of the day was spent out with friends. Shopping in San Francisco and Walnut Creek. A day trip to Santa Cruz. The last days of being carefree. She found a diamond ring in Iwao's footlocker and

retraced several conversations he had with her father. Once she graduated, a proposal was inevitable.

Ayume promised to meet Iwao's flight and bring him home from SFO. Suzo was to meet them for sashimi and sake at Mifune's.

Nyoko purred and begged to be fed. Her sleek silver form weaved around Suzo's calves as she walked to the kitchen. Iwao wasn't as fond of her, but once asked Suzo to cat-sit as a favor for his sister. The cat made it clear she preferred life with Suzo by running away several times. After a frightening brush with traffic, Ayume rehomed her with Suzo and bought a parakeet.

Suzomi showered and left for school after a cuddle with Nyoko and a quick tidy around the apartment. She knew Iwao would want to share his flight with her and left her cell phone off. He'd be in the air in an hour; well into Dr. Rhoenberg's lecture on gender dichotomy in pre-WWII socialist fiction.

America barely had time to blink.

At 10:06, a Mexicana plane slammed into the Bank of America Plaza just two minutes before a Delta Airbus cut low into Fountain Place. Other planes struck Shell Plaza and the Union Texas Petroleum Building in Houston, while an Air Canada flight left it's course over Lake Michigan to hit the BP Amoco headquarters in Chicago. The Oval Office and FAA ordered all airports immediately close and in-progress flights grounded as soon as possible. Response was quick, but not fast enough to stop a flight from Vancouver from shaking building foundations near the Washington Mutual Tower in Seattle. Pilots still in the air were ordered to switch to a predetermined safety squawk to show they were still playing nice. Military bases and control towers watched for anyone who didn't.

Iwao tried to read the rest of his book amid Captain Neil Hammond playing tour guide and flight attendants jostling through the cabin with \$4.50 snack boxes. The kid sitting next to the window ignored all the warnings about radio devices and vigorously texted someone since before take-off. The same two guys kept walking up and down the aisle as if they needed to use the lavatory. Iwao tried to ignore it all. As much fun as Canada was, he looked forward to home and Suzo's gentle breasts.

It took Iwao a while to realize Captain Hammond stopped talking and the flight attendants disappeared from the aisles. Only 1/4 of coach had their snack boxes and the movie monitors were lowered, but the screens were blank. The movie was supposed to start twenty minutes ago. Headsets weren't distributed. A few more minutes of nothing passed. The two fellows walked forward from the aft again and met another guy at the curtain to first class. All three disappeared behind the curtain for a while and then fastened it open. First class passengers were ordered into coach and the men returned with badges out and guns in plain sight. "Federal Air Marshals! Everyone remain seated," they barked. The kid in the window seat got the news. Another ringtone sounded. "SHUT THE PHONES OFF," a marshal snarled. "NOW." Some people complied, but the teen just looked up and kept going. "Bacon on board." "FO REAL??" "shitz on yo" "?????" "trippin lyk dayum" "mofos on tv... OBL all walkin n shit" "fcuk"

Iwao turned his phone on and turned the sounds off. Air marshals to the rescue was surely something to save. He carefully snapped quick pics of the marshals putting people in their seats and took his hide cues from the kid next to him. The kid offered some of his jacket to hide the phone under. There was some irritation among first class

passengers that they were reseated but the marshals assured them it was for their safety. No one was to move. What people didn't know was the flight crew was asked out of the cockpit, tazed and handcuffed. Flight attendents were also bound and packed into the lavatories. Captain Hammond's heart seized from multiple tazings and was positioned back into his seat. He was dead before the squawk order came in.

An announcement came over the PA. "We regret the inconvenience. Due to hijack activity, we have orders to secure this flight. Please remain seated. We will be landing shortly. Thank you for your cooperation."

Iwao faithfully relayed this to Suzo and snapped a few more pictures. A marshal trying to look pleasant with one hand on his gun. Passengers around him. People whispering. The full cabin. Clouds outside. F-16s. Two of them. One below and behind the other as they approached. The lead wing pushed ahead and got close to the aircraft. Kids marveled at the plane while some cried and worried. Fighters wouldn't buzz a passenger jet unless something was seriously wrong. The marshal moved down the aisle and confiscated a cell phone from a woman trying to call her husband. Iwao snapped another picture and sent it. The pilots weren't going away. The lag F-16 dropped beneath the aircraft and popped up on the other side. Why isn't the captain explaining this? Is he busy with fighters? More people grew worried and suspicious. The marshal drew his gun. An icy shot of adrenaline gripped Iwao's gut. The kid next to him trembled. They looked at each other. The teen wasn't ghetto-texting anymore. Texts popped up pleading for him to keep talking. His responses were brief and unembellished. Scared. "i thnk were fcked."

Iwao clicked and sent a quick shot of the boy staring blankly; pale. The lead F-16 dropped back into view and moved away from the

plane. Iwao's next message was text-only and addressed to Suzo, Ayume and his parents. "Pray. I love you."

'Message Sent.'

